

My friends, this past week I was catching up on some podcasts I wanted to hear while I was on the treadmill. Several were from last month. Evidently, the Miss America pageant is no longer held in September. It's now held in January. I didn't know about the change because I don't watch it. I just don't find it to be interesting television. But from the Miss America pageant comes tonight's sermon. Go figure.

Here is what I heard on the Dennis Prager show that caught my interest. Miss Hawaii was asked the following question: Which is your primary identification, a citizen of Hawaii, a citizen of the United States, or a citizen of the world? To me, this is almost a rhetorical question. My answer would have been that I am first a citizen of the United States of America. I wouldn't have to give it a moment's thought. In case you are curious, Miss Hawaii did not agree with me. She identifies first as a citizen of

the world—or perhaps she thought that was what the judges wanted to hear.

For me, a more interesting question to ask in shul is this: do you consider yourself an American Jew, or a Jewish American? Of course we are both, but which would be your primary identity?

Let me take a moment to define the two terms. When I say American Jew, I mean you identify as an American first and as a Jew second. By Jewish American, I mean the opposite. You primarily identify as a Jew, and only after that as an American. For me, the question is easy to answer, but what is interesting to me is that I am less than fully comfortable with that answer.

I am a Jewish American. There is nothing that identifies me more than the fact that I am Jewish. My values are Jewish values. The source of my values is the Torah, the

primary source for all Jewish values. With that, I am completely comfortable. My discomfort comes from the fact that my identification as an American is so strong, and such a source of pride to me, it feels a bit unsettling that anything could be stronger. Something is; it just feels a bit odd.

I believe I know why. I believe it stems from the fact that my core Jewish values and the core values on which America was founded are virtually identical. Whether we are talking about the Hebrew slaves in Egypt or the British colonists in America, the same core values applies: “the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God.”<sup>1</sup>

My friends, it is true that our founding fathers knew the dangers of theocracy. They set up not a theocracy, but a democratic republic. But they were deeply steeped in religion. They envisioned a secular government serving a

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<sup>1</sup> Inaugural Address of President John F. Kennedy, delivered on January 20, 1961

religious society. To prove this, I need only quote from our first founding document. Jefferson did not say that society nor government nor logical dicta endow us with “certain unalienable rights.” As we all well know, the Declaration of Independence unabashedly states that it is our “Creator” from Whom those inalienable rights emanate.

Yes, America was founded on Judeo-Christian values. That is why it is difficult for me to separate my identity as a Jew from my identity as an American. And lest you think it is only I or other Jews only who put the “Judeo” in Judeo-Christian, I beg you to do two things. One is to allow some time for this sermon to be posted on our website and look at the text. You will see an image of what Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson proposed as the seal of the United States of America. It was the words “Rebellion Against Tyrants Is Obedience To God,” with the words encircling an image of the Hebrew slaves crossing the Red Sea. And the second is simply to listen to some very

powerful words written by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., in his *Letter From a Birmingham Jail*, the words which lead me to the conclusion of my remarks tonight:

*One day the South will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, with the noble sense of purpose that enables them to face jeering and hostile mobs, and with the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will be old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy two year old woman in Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride segregated buses, and who responded with ungrammatical profundity to one who inquired about her weariness: "My feets is tired, but my soul is at rest." They will be the young high school and college students, the young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders, courageously and nonviolently sitting in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience' sake. One day the South will know*

*that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo Christian heritage...*

I am a Jew. I am an American. I thank God I am both.  
Each reinforces the other.

